

## Notes and News

### The Archaeology of British Towns

*We published last year an article by Martin Biddle on 'Archaeology and the History of British Towns' (ANTIQUITY, 1968, 109). David T.-D. Clarke, Curator of the Colchester and Essex Museum, and formerly Keeper of Antiquities at the City of Leicester Museums, and Miss B. R. K. Dunnett, Supervisor of the Colchester Excavation Committee, have sent us this brief comment, to which we invited Mr Biddle to reply.*

We feel this article does some injustice to those of us who pursue the archaeological war in the cold and muddy trenches of our historic towns. As archaeologists we can sympathize with the author's theme, but perhaps he does not always take into account the problems with which we are confronted.

Many town sites are not available until the existing property has been demolished, and are then subject to restrictions of the time and space available for excavation. There is also the problem of disposal of excavated soil. In these circumstances a decision may have to be taken regarding those levels which are likely to offer the greatest contribution to knowledge, but it would be wrong to assume that if medieval structures were encountered they would be, or in our experience have been, uncritically destroyed because of a bias towards Roman or earlier periods. In most cases the upper levels have been so disturbed by later building that medieval remains are totally absent or offer little chance of comprehensible interpretation.

In the case of the report on Colchester which is quoted, the information alleged to be absent

will be found on page 38. The Committee, which we have the honour to serve and which does not have the honour of being mentioned, has existed in its present form for five years, and inherits a forty-year-old mantle of similar local effort, by which the archaeological knowledge of our town and Britain in general has been in no small degree enriched, in both the Roman and Medieval periods.

#### *Martin Biddle replies:*

Anyone who has dug in towns fully understands the difficulties, and those cited are certainly daunting. But often the real question is not so much the difficulties of a particular site, as the choice of site and the reasons behind that choice. If one consistently digs in areas where there are cellars, then the later levels will be absent. If one wishes to look at the later evidence, then sites have to be chosen with this in mind—and there are few towns where this cannot be done to some extent, if the wish is present. The difficulties of town excavation are too often used as an excuse for not doing what should be done; for not thinking large enough or broadly enough, for not asking for or getting enough money, for not planning far enough ahead, and for not building up sufficiently close contacts with the relevant local authorities.

The crucial point is the attitude and interests of the archaeologist concerned. I wanted to see in the Colchester report in question (*Arch. J.*, CXXIII, 1966, 27) 'some indication, even of the lack of evidence, if that was the case, that this site was within the walls of an important

medieval city'. Mr Clarke and Miss Dunnett call my attention to p. 38, where they say the information will be found. The relevant paragraph begins 'The only other feature of interest [my italics] was a small pit . . . of the early Saxon period.' But what does this mean? Of interest to whom? The writer of the report? The sections published in fig. 5 are quite blank from the modern surface to the top of the Roman layers, a depth of over four feet. Was there really disturbed, undifferentiated garden soil to such a depth everywhere? And if so, what does this mean; over what period did it build up? But the tradition of publishing sections on which only the Roman levels are properly drawn seems only too well established. By far the most extraordinary example is a section through the Close wall at Lincoln, titled 'The Sub-Deanery and Old Bishop's Palace', where a depth of over 12 ft. of post-Roman deposits, in association with major structures, is left blank, only the Roman levels being properly shown (*Arch. J.*, cxvii, 1960, fig. 3 opp. p. 46). It is perhaps hardly a coincidence that so little is

known to us of the post-Roman archaeology of Lincoln.

*Challenge from Colchester*, the appeal leaflet of the Colchester Excavations Committee, makes quite plain where the balance of interest lies. Apart from two passing mentions, the only reference to the post-Roman town calls attention to how little is known 'of how and when the [Roman] town came to its end and the Saxon and Medieval city began to arise in its ruins'. There is no indication that here was a borough of sufficient importance to merit an early Norman castle equalled only by the White Tower of London.

Our present knowledge of Romano-British towns, gathered by extensive and persistent research over the last fifty years and more, sets an example which must be followed in the later periods. It would be a tragedy if the knowledge so well gained for one period should blind us to the need to extend this work towards an understanding of our towns throughout their existence.

## Timber Mortuary Houses and Earthen Long Barrows Again

*Mr Derek Simpson* (ANTIQUITY, 1968, 142) discussed the Editor's note 'Northmen and Southmen' (ANTIQUITY, 1967, 313), with special reference to Paul Ashbee's publication of the Fussell's Lodge non-megalithic long barrow. Mr Ashbee writes:

It is proper that a cause about to be enshrined should have an *advocatus diaboli* probing its frailties. Mr Simpson [1] has taken up this rôle to arraign what are, in his view, general weaknesses in certain arguments regarding Northern and Eastern European elements in our Earlier Neolithic and, in particular, those about the Fussell's Lodge [2] and other pitched mortuary houses which have been incorporated in our earthen long barrows.

Mr Simpson's specific objections regarding Fussell's Lodge are, if he is read aright (his fn. 7 must refer to p. 14 not p. 75 of the report), the absence of positive traces of vertical timbers, the covering by bones of the central pit which was thought to have held such a timber and,

finally, the functions of the pit which slighted the entrance to the trapezoid enclosure.

In 1957 when this excavation was undertaken I also was inclined to be hostile to the concept of mortuary houses. I felt that more positive traces would have to be found for such a view to be acceptable. Mr Simpson must surely realize that prehistory is the product of a relationship between an individual and the mute remains. More positive traces have come to light, namely those at Wayland's Smithy, and my views have changed accordingly.

For the evidence of mortuary houses in earthen long barrows there are two sources. These are, first, the modern excavations which have produced manifold aspects, still largely imprecise and little understood, of the mechanics of the decay and collapse of a structure, and, secondly, the results of excavation over more than a century. Thus the evidence cannot be expected to conform in the ready manner which would seem to be Mr Simpson's expectation.